

## Kazik and Kazia: A symbolic gender change in the midst of the fight for independence of Poland

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**SUMMARY** : Wanda Gertz was one of thirty Polish women who rushed to the frontlines of WW I in male disguise. The author asks what could have provoked such behavior by analyzing archival sources on Wanda Gertz, as well as facts mistakenly associated with her. This paper aims at showing patriotism as one among many motivations for symbolic gender change and joining the army. It also tackles the question of the perception of female soldiers who pass for men, then and now.

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World War I played a vital role in the emancipation of women who, by working in factories, on the railways, and in government offices, replaced the men fighting at the front. In dispensaries and ambulance trains at the front they dressed the wounds of the injured. They performed auxiliary service in special women's troops, stood

on sentry duty, and guarded the food supplies. Courageous and composed, they set off on the road as messengers and intelligence agents. There were also those for whom even this was not enough. They cut their hair short, flattened their breasts with bandages; then, wearing men's uniforms and carrying rifles, they set off for the frontlines to fight.

The Archives of New Records (AAN), the Committee of Women's History in the Fight for Independence (KHKwON) and the Polish Underground Movement (SPP) in London contain reports and photographs which prove the participation of women in the frontline combat; among them were two women hiding behind the name "Kazik". One, Wanda Gertz, managed to have a military career. We know nothing about the second "Kazik" apart from the fact that when she disclosed her identity, her comrades-in-arms called her "Kazia", and that she came from Cracow, where she had worked as a nurse for a well-known surgeon. Wanda Gertz-Kazimierz (Kazik) Żuchowicz-recounted her adventures in the first person in a compilation of frontline memoirs[1]. The Story of Kazia, the nurse from Cracow, was told by her commanding officer, Konstanty Aleksandrowicz (Kostek Alexandrowicz).

**"Kazik Żuchowicz"**

Wanda Gertz was one of about thirty women who set off with the Polish legions to the front of World War I, but she was the only one who had the opportunity to put herself in the midst of direct fight with the enemy. She was born on April 13, 1896 in Warsaw, in a family descending from Saxon settlers. Wanda's father, Jan Gertz, had participated in the January Uprising. His house was the place where the former insurgents met to recall the times of their conspiracy and struggle against the enemy. Little Wanda Gertz listened to these recollections with her older brother, with whom she later played in the yard in the company of his friends. The stories told by the insurgents aroused the children's interest because the main theme of their games was the fight, particularly the noble one-the chivalrous one. It is worth quoting longer passages of Wanda Gertz's previously unpublished childhood memoirs, since they help to explain many decisions she made later in life. "From my early childhood, I don't know why, my greatest interests and dreams were focused on the army. As a five-year-old, I never played with dolls, but only with soldiers, and I used to have so many of them. Having older siblings, I stayed in the company of my brother who was four years older than me. It was with him and with other boys who were his friends that we played army all the time. . . . Being the only girl in the company of boys, I was assigned various mediocre roles in group games. . . . When we played army, I was a recruit, because in those times it was unthinkable that a girl could be a soldier. In return for acceptance in

the group of boys I had to do the hardest work, constantly showing obedience to my "authorities", running around and carrying out orders to bring some things or toys left behind, or doing something that boys did not feel like doing. In spite of my tenacity in serving the company of the boys, they considered me to be something inferior because I was a girl, an unavoidable dogsbody. Since I wanted to display my equality, be it wrestling where one had to show physical fitness, or fighting another group of children where one had to demonstrate courage, I tended to fall into such combat enthusiasm that often the opponents had to take flight from the battleground. I would often be left thoroughly bruised when a few boys were fighting with me in order to take me prisoner, and my companions abandoned me to save their own skin. This made my brother and his friends accept me in their company more and more often since they thought that at times not only did I equal them, but even was ahead of many of the playmates, and in the end they got used to it. As the more resourceful and combative children received various kinds of rewards in the form of promotions, some became colonels, captains and officers, and they could give orders to their subordinates. We had special paper caps for the privileged ones, and we watched them with great respect while they proudly strutted among us. My fondest dream was to obtain at least an NCO rank to be allowed to wear a colorful cap."[2]

Wanda Gertz's childhood experience gave rise to a conviction which did not leave her till the end of her life-the conviction that a girl, in order to be noticed, must show that she is smarter and can work harder than the boys, as well as to show a kind of craftiness, because sheer involvement is not enough to be noticed in the men's/boys' world. The above description shows that, in fact, in order to be noticed she had to behave like a "boy". Wanda Gertz's parents were quite permissive and saw nothing wrong in the blithe and carefree children's games. They only intervened when the games left children severely roughed-up.

With her patriotic roots and the fondness for the uniform, as a teenager she joined a secret girl gude group, and then the Polish Confederation (Konfederacja Polska), an organization focused on boosting pro-independence spirits. As scouts and in the Polish Confederation, which was a paramilitary organization, the girls performed organizational and auxiliary functions. This role did not live up to the expectations of the robust teenage girl, seasoned in back-yard battles. While her friends were shedding tears after their beloved ones left them, Gertz worked out a plan which made it possible for her to have adventures and to experience the happiest period of her life[3]. She was eighteen when she first impersonated Kazik Żuchowicz and set off to the front. Her secret scouting acquaintances supported her-her leader and friends "provided

men's clothes, and eagerly helped me. First, they cut my hair. At that instance I felt that there was no way back."[4] The next day she went to the assembly point, where "after fixing some formalities, that is, after showing previously obtained passport with Kazik Żuchowicz's name, I received the order to change into a uniform"[5]. Disguised as a man, she marched off together with her troop to get on a train to Lublin. The first serious obstacle emerged in the Lublin barracks, where medical examinations were performed. "I was struck dumb, not knowing what to do, whether I should go or stay. To my comfort, it was not only me who wanted a superficial examination since the boys were also afraid of doctors' sentence. . . . One after another, we approached the desks and gave our last names; in the end, however, we were told that all those assembled were to move to another room to proceed with medical examination. . . . I approached the desk and asked who could exempt me from the examination. Lieutenant D. was pointed out to me; slightly surprised, he asked me about the reason. I was silent. A writer who was a witness of this conversation expressed an assumption that I was a girl in disguise... It was hard for me to deny this. The only thing I could do was to ask them not to send me back home. The lieutenant promised me he would try to find a 'cool officer' who would agree to take me to the front. In the meantime, however, he told me to move to another staging post in order to avoid meeting the boys who were starting to see through everything."[6] This way, thanks to kind officers, dodges, and

detours Kazik Żuchowicz was on his/her way to the front. As major Otokar Brzoza's[7] *ordynansa* [8] she got to Kowel, where she became acquainted with the staff and the people around the artillery magazine and waited for her assignment. She worked in the commissariat for two or three weeks where she was busy recording registers and giving out artillery equipment. She befriended one of her comrades from the quarter, M. Doręgowski, who loyally accompanied her in later battles and wartime adventures. Both of them were assigned to Lieut.

Mazurkiewicz's[9] 2nd howitzer battery stationing in Ugly (Volhynian voivodeship). The appalling conditions, lack of basic equipment, and the accommodation in dugouts did not match the image of the war in the girl's mind. War was not about singing battle songs while seated around the fire in a glade, or while marching; it was about hard physical work while building dugouts and crossties. "First, one had to break the frozen ground with a pickaxe and sweep it aside with a spade. After pounding the so-called iron cramp into a beam, and, after putting on a bar, one had to pull upward both of its ends at the same time to tear out a pole stuck into the ground. We would work like this in pairs. I had to summon up my strength to, instantly after hearing 'heave-ho!', pull up the end of a bar simultaneously with my "workmate" standing next to me. For I did not want to hear comments that I didn't pull hard enough." [10]

Some people (including the commanders) knew that there were girls among the soldiers. They tried to protect them as best as they could from combat and enemy attacks, but also from the obtrusiveness of their own troops. A study concerning the participation of women in the struggle for independence carried out by an instructor from the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association (Związek Harcerstwa Polskiego), contains a shocking description of the death of a female soldier named Mroczkówna. The woman was wounded in the battle near Kaczanówka, and in March 1918 in Uładówka, Ukraine, her tongue was cut and her eyes were gouged out. Then, the woman soldier, still alive, was grabbed by her legs and her head was smashed against a telegraph pole.[11] The cruelty of the Russian soldiers is disturbing; what were they driven by? Was it just hatred towards the Poles? Was a woman disguised as a man a disturbing misfit in the eyes of Russians, just like Joan of Arc, boldly dressed as a man, shook the peaceful existence of the simple Christian folk?

Fortunately Gertz escaped such misfortunes. After the first heavy period of adaptation, the war started to resemble an adventure. For a start, she was assigned a horse, which she did not know how to groom or break in. The duty, unpleasant in the beginning, hardened her character and taught her to face adversities; it also instilled in her a fondness for horses. Then, as a reservist, she was assigned to

field cannon exercises. "We were taught how to climb on and off wagons and cannons." [12] Soon she was also assigned to a communications platoon, where she learned how to handle the equipment as well as to install lines and fix broken wires. [13] When front-line activities intensified at the end of June, major Brzoza ordered her to run the regimental library. From this moment on she was permanently close to the regiment's command. "Russian airplanes would fly above us every day, examining the location of our battle forces. At that moment, the cannon and machinegun cannonade would start. . . . I would spend my leisure hours sitting in a tree, curiously watching the explosions of bursting grenades with my fellow soldiers." [14] During one of such observations a grenade explosion made the horses scamper off. Two of them ran straight into a bog, from which they could not get out. None of the soldiers dared to save them under enemy fire. Wanda Gertz, a budding horse lover, could not watch the animals suffer, and her "manly" courage made her ignore her comrades-in-arms and the whistling shells, and pull both of the horses out from the mud. The animals were quickly taken by legionnaires from another battery, who announced that the horse foundlings belonged to them.

In the meantime, the military operations increased. "Some nights, repeatedly interrupted by cannonade of artillery pieces and rattling of machine guns, resembled hell. The Russians were running and

shouting 'Hurrah! Hurrah!' It sent shivers down my spine, like an electric current." [15] As the Austrians were fleeing, the Russians approached closer and closer. The legions' 7th infantry regiment stationing in the vicinity awakened in Wanda Gertz a desire for new adventures. "Since I had not directly taken part in any battle, I decided to split to the infantry. I was talked into this by a comrade-in-arms, so the two of us decided to stay in some village and join the first infantry troop we encountered. We stopped in Stobychów, where we were supposed to withdraw from the artillery." [16] Suddenly struck night blindness, the exhausted Wanda Gertz was forced to change her plans. Blindly holding on to a wagon, she moved along with her company, which was ordered to retreat as far as Stochód.

At this time rumors started circling among the soldiers about the possibility of the legions' retreat and Piłsudski's resignation as part of a protest against Austria's policy. "Since I had already served for six months in the artillery, and my uniform was completely worn out, I was offered a leave. In the meantime, the issue of withdrawing the brigade from the front was to be decided. Depending on the decision, I was to return or to stay at home, because I did not want to roam around staging posts and live a barrack life." [17]

This was how Kazik Żuchowicz's front career ended. And this was

how Wanda Gertz-the latter-day Emilia Plater[18] -started her long military service for her homeland. Gertz was lucky in terms of the poetry written about her. The first poem, entitled "Kazik", was written by her friend Zofia Zawiszkanka:

"Oh patient memory, please keep faithfully  
The image of that girl-Knight my dreams brought to me:  
Of a sage or a saint was the look in her eyes  
Quietly focused, courageous, so sad and so wise...

The delicate half-smile, so childishly sweet,  
And the way she salutes her command in the street;  
Two gestures into one motion merging,  
A manly soldier's honor and the pride of a virgin.

Oh, dreams of old! I could've been the same,  
But my paths were tangled, and love was to blame.  
Whether I'm myself - who knows? I can't tell

When my tears blur the image of the Knight-girl."[19]

For Zawiszkanka, Wanda Gertz was a true heroine; she became the spokeswoman and a defender of Gertz who often evoked extreme reactions. In Zawiszkanka's recollections, her admiration for

Wanda's manly behavior and appearance is apparent.

An anonymous report on Wanda Gertz's return from the front to Warsaw has survived. Young girls from Women Troops of the Polish Military Organization (Oddziały Żeńskie Polskiej Organizacji Wojskowej) rebelled against performing solely auxiliary functions in comparison to men troops, and dreamt about real war adventures. "These roles, undoubtedly necessary yet so mundane, as our young eyes saw them, did not satisfy us at all. Therefore, the arrival of Kazik and Zofka Plewińska from the front hastened our mutiny. We presented a list of desiderata; we demanded military training and preparation for direct combat for independence. Kazik's incredible adventures as well as her conviction that the withdrawal of girls from front was only momentary, imbued us with optimism. With our eyes on Kazik, whose boyish figure reminded of Grottger's paintings, we eagerly worked on our memorandum. Zofka was fully supportive of our plans, though she was more restrained when recounting her adventures. Fortunately, I was one of the initiated."[20]

Unfortunately, Wanda Gertz does not describe how she was treated by her comrades-in-arms. She was certainly protected by her command since few people knew her real identity. She also did her best not to reveal her gender. Her boyish looks, handsome figure, and upbringing among boys turned out to be helpful. She



wrote nothing about her feelings towards those, who surrounded her-the men and the few women who, just like her, chose to wear men's clothing. It appears that legionary service was something natural for her. But was it natural for her alone? Did she see other women at the front? Serving as a commandant of the Second Voluntary Legion of Women in Vilnius, she evoked mixed feelings among her commanding officers. They considered her treatment of subordinates excessively harsh, particularly the hard drill and severe conditions of life she imposed upon them. Her subordinates were punished for having a conversation with a man in the street. Several girls failed to handle the regime and committed suicide. Wanda Gertz explained to her superiors that her actions were the result of her concern for the girls' morals, since some of them represented the so-called underclass. She did not want her girls to be treated like ordinary camp followers-and this was how the girls starting their service in the uniform were treated in the beginning.

Today, Wanda Gertz is an object of interest for gender studies and queer theory scholars. For them, she constitutes evidence that it is socialization and not biological sex that determines one's predispositions and choices. Gertz grew up among her brothers and their friends. Her inborn and instilled predispositions made her choose a military career once reserved for men; first, in the Voluntary Legion of Women (Ochotnicza Legia Kobiet), later,

during the interwar period in the Female Military Training (Przysposobienie Wojskowe Kobiet), and then as Piłsudski's secretary in the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces. During World War II, while serving in the Home Army Women's Troop of Subversion and Sabotage, she personally carried out death sentences on women informers. She never started a family, and, even in private, she kept men at arm's length, and was guided by officers' principles. For contemporary culture critics, her life is an example of socialization, which imbued certain features, dreams and yearnings into a young girl; but they were of the kind that was "naturally" ascribed to the opposite sex. People with no gender awareness ask themselves: to what degree was Wanda Gertz a woman? What was her sexual orientation? They ask these questions, as if they were to depict a clear picture of the choices she made in her life. An average reader today would identify Wanda Gertz as a butch lesbian, rather unfeminine and unattractive, for whom pursuing a masculine career was the only choice. Maria Dąbrowska met Wanda Gertz in Lublin in 1916, while she was working in the editorial office of the *Polska Ludowa* newspaper. "*Polska Ludowa* was skillfully and efficiently managed by the so-called 'citizen Kazik,' who had served under the same name for quite some time as a soldier of the First Brigade at the front. She was a nice girl with a swashbuckling flaxen mane which she would brush aside off her eyes with a shake of her head to reveal a cheeky young

shaver's face. She had a fiance, or a suitor, who looked like a girl in comparison to her. So, Miss Kazik even organized expeditions to distant places in order to win supporters or sell subscriptions, and she would often get back with empty hands." [21] Today, it would be difficult to define if that feminine boy was really a delicate man, or maybe he was another woman soldier who had not been "outed". He might equally well have been the soldiering companion, Doręgowski, whom Wanda Gertz mentioned in her memoirs. The companion's identity is irrelevant at this stage, yet the fact that it is unknown shows how Wanda Gertz evades any attempt of tagging. Once she starts to sound like a lesbian, a fiance appears in her life...

Writing a biography requires delving into the private life of the person in question. In the case of Wanda Gertz, it was exceptionally hard to ascertain what she liked, what kind of music she listened to, what she read, who she spent her time with outside her military environment. Her entire life was associated with the army. Even her outside-service affiliation with the Masonic lodge and the Theosophical Society was connected to the legionary environment until Marshall Piłsudski officially banned all of his confidant officers from serving causes other than Poland, and ordered them to categorically withdraw from the Masonic lodges.

The surviving accounts of Gertz written by her subordinate show that

she felt the best in the barracks, where she was able to live in a group and hold a position of power and responsibility. This is what it was like in Vilnius in the years 1919-1921, where she was a commanding officer of the Second Voluntary Legion of Women (II Ochotniczej Legii Kobiet); also, when she lived in the Belweder presidential palace while working at the Belweder Museum, or later, in the POW camps in Germany. Regardless of the camps being fenced with barbed wire; regardless of the Nazis' aggression towards the prisoners, Wanda Gertz, the commanding officer of all women officers, once again felt responsible for her subordinates. She fought for their existence and organized their time. Once again, she was called "Kazik", and March 4, the Catholic saint's day of Kazimierz and Kazimiera occasioned a celebration in the camp. On this day, Wanda Gertz was personally given little poems, matchbox houses, and cigarettes, since she was an ardent smoker. [22]

### "Citizen Kazia"

The other "Kazik's" lot is described in a completely different way. In this case there are no personal accounts from the front or impressions of life in the barracks; instead, we have observations concerning the behavior and the reception of women cross-dressers in the ranks of men, written by a commanding officer, Konstanty Aleksandrowicz of the First Brigade of the Polish



Legions. These recollections were published in 1934, together with a picture of the heroine, in the ninth volume of *Niepodległość* [23] (*Independence*). The Archives of New Records contain an original manuscript written in pencil on March 18, 1916 in Cracow.[24] The title, "Kazik. (Kobieta-żołnierz)" ("Kazik (A Woman Soldier)"), might erroneously suggest that the text is about Gertz.

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